

## ***FISH & WILDLIFE COMMISSION AGENDA ITEM COVER SHEET***

**Meeting Date:** February 13, 2014

**Agenda Item:** Raundal Coulee Conservation Easement

**Division:** Wildlife

**Action Needed:** Final Action

**Time Needed on Agenda for this Presentation:** 10 minutes

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### **Background**

FWP proposes to purchase a Conservation Easement for \$900,000 from Habitat Montana to protect wildlife habitat and ensure agricultural production, and continued public access on the Tom and Karen Browning Ranch (hereafter, Raundal Coulee). The CE would protect approximately 2,596 acres of riparian, plains forest, and sagebrush grasslands in southeast Petroleum County and along the eastern boundary of Garfield County and the Musselshell River. The project is located 15 miles north of Mosby, 30 miles northeast of Winnett and 30 miles northwest of Sand Springs.

The property consists of two parcels approximately eight miles apart. The first parcel – the Davis Unit – is 2,080 acres (1,752 acres of ponderosa pine-dominated plains forest and sagebrush grassland and 328 acres dedicated to dryland crops). The second parcel – the River Unit, located along the Musselshell River – contains 515 deeded acres, with approximately 3.5 miles of plains cottonwood-dominated Musselshell River frontage (16 acres of farmstead area, 207 acres of irrigated alfalfa fields, 22 acres of dryland crops, and 270 acres of riparian and native grassland).

### **Public Involvement Process & Results**

A Final EA and Decision Notice have been completed and published, following requisite public involvement. Strong public support has been voiced for this effort via formal comments received.

### **Alternatives and Analysis**

Proposed Action – This CE will conserve agriculture and wildlife habitat and ensure continuing public access to the ranch's lands and adjacent public lands. Wildlife habitat will be protected against development of the property, and no new sodbusting or removal of native vegetation. Public recreational access will be available for hunting, fishing, trapping, and other purposes year-round. A rest-rotation grazing system will be implemented to improve the quality of vegetation for both cattle and wildlife, and the land's traditional land use-agriculture-will remain in perpetuity.

No Action – The No Action alternative for this project is described as MFWP not purchasing a CE on the Tom and Karen Browning Ranch. The landowners would likely continue to operate the ranch with its current configuration. However, future land management status, public access, and configuration could change if the ranch were to sell on the open market.

### **Agency Recommendation & Rationale**

FWP recommends Commission approval to acquire the CE. Completion of this CE is in the best interests of working agricultural landscapes, fish and wildlife, and public recreation.

### **Proposed Motion**

I move the F&W Commission approve purchase of the Raundal Coulee Conservation Easement from Tom and Karen Browning.